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ABSTRACT

Purposes of this study were to reexamine Piaget's conception of the roles of intention and consequence as bases for moral judgments, and to assess the implications of this effort for Kohlberg's concept of homogeneity of moral reasoning stages. The study examined the effects of manipulation of the severity of consequences in moral dilemmas on the resulting moral judgments of adults. It was hypothesized that adults sometimes make moral judgments based on the outcome of a situation, rather than the actor's intent. It was expected that actors in stories with more severe outcomes would be evaluated more harshly than actors in stories with less severe outcomes. Subjects were 61 undergraduate students. Another 58 undergraduates ranked the stories for severity of outcome. Demographic data and subjects' responses to five short dilemma stories were obtained. Subjects used a 7-point rating scale to respond to six opinion statements designed to measure perceptions of the actor's responsibility for an accident, intelligence, goodness or badness, carelessness, concern for others, and ability to foresee the accident. Findings indicated that consequences can affect moral judgments, with more severe consequences resulting in more negative judgments. Results also showed that intent is taken into consideration when judgments are made. Findings present difficulties for Kohlberg's conception of stage homogeneity and are more consistent with Piaget's original views of stage homogeneity in moral development. (RH)

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Moral Judgment:

Intention and Consequence Reconsidered

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Moral Judgment:
Intention and Consequence Reconsidered

Piaget (1932/1965) proposed a theory of moral judgment based on cognitive development and social experience, consisting of two stages of development. According to Piaget, the young child makes moral judgments based on consequence, with a transition to intention-based judgments occurring at about seven years of age.

Kohlberg's (1969) theory, like Piaget`s, emphasizes cognitive structures as underlying and organizing moral reasoning. Kohlberg's (1969) system consists of six stages of development. These stages or systems of thought form an invariant sequence with movement always forward, never backward, and upward to the next stage. Stages are never skipped and moral judgments are consistent within stages.

Challenges to Kohlberg's (1969) assumptions that each stage of moral reasoning is homogeneous have been made by researchers (O'Malley, 1986; Walster; 1966) who have shown that subjects do change their level of moral reasoning depending on environmental circumstances. Similar challenges to Piaget`s (1932/1965) theory exist. For example, several researchers have shown that young children who would be expected to make judgments on the basis of consequence can, under certain circumstances, make them on the basis of intention (Berg-Cross, 1975; Moran &

McCullers, 1984). Further, it has been demonstrated (Moran & O'Brien, 1983a; Moran & O'Brien, 1983b; Shultz, Wright, & Schleifer, 1986) that the young child is capable of using the actor's intent as the basis of forming moral judgments across a wide range of contexts.

Moran and McCullers (1984) read stories to children aged 4, 7, and 11 years, and college freshmen to investigate the effects of recency and specific story content on moral reasoning. Their findings indicated that the child was able to use intent information, especially when the content involved injury to a person.

Elkind and Dabek (1977) suggested that young children judge personal injury as more serious than property damage, and thus make selective judgments on the basis of story content. They found that kindergarten, second-, and fourth-grade children judged personal injury as more culpable than property damage when intentionality was held constant. Thus, personal injury appears to elicit harsher moral judgments than other negative outcomes, regardless of intent.

In another study, Suls, Gutkin, and Kalle (1979) investigated roles of damage, intention and social consequence in moral judgments of children at all age levels from kindergarten through fifth grade. Both intention and social consequence in moral judgments of children at all age levels from kindergarten through fifth grade. Both intention cues and social

consequence cues increased in importance with age, and parental reaction rather than peer reaction cues had more of an impact on children's judgments.

Elkind (1981) suggested that, when dealing with children, adults may judge actions on a quantitative ("consequence") basis rather than upon intention, giving more severe punishment for larger amounts of damage. As a result children may learn the importance of consequences by observing parental reactions to behavior.

Walster (1966) manipulated severity of consequences in accidents and found that adult subjects were harsher in their moral judgments when consequences were more severe. Thus it appears that adults, like children, do at times make judgments on the basis of consequence.

The purpose of this study was to reexamine Piaget`s conception of the role of intention and consequence as a basis for moral judgments and assess the implications of this effort for Kohlberg's concept of homogeneity of moral reasoning stages. The present study examined the effects of manipulating severity of consequences in moral dilemmas on the resulting moral judgments of adults. It was hypothesized that adults at times make moral judgments based on the outcome of a situation, rather than the actor's intent, just as children do. Specifically, it was expected that actors in stories with more severe outcomes would be evaluated more harshly.

Method

Subjects

The subjects were 61 undergraduate students enrolled in the introductory psychology course at a large state university. Subjects were volunteers who received extra credit for participating in the research. An additional 58 undergraduate students ranked the stories for severity of outcome.

Instrument

The instrument consisted of a demographic information page and five short dilemma stories, each printed on a separate page, describing an accident and its consequences. The first story, which was used to establish a baseline measure, was Piaget's classic story of the broken cups:

> John, a five year old boy is playing in his room. He is called to dinner. He goes to the dining room. Behind the door there is a chair and on the chair is a tray with fifteen cups on it. He rushes into the room, bangs the tray, and all the cups get chipped or broken. (Piaget, 1932/1965)

Each of the remaining four stories described a different accident. Each story had a "mild" and a "severe" outcome. The intent of the main character in three of the stories was neutral and in the fourth story the character's

intent was positive. As the exact wording of the stories can be critical, the four stories and the two endings for each are presented below.

Jackie

Jackie usually stopped on her way to work at a convenience store to buy a cup of coffee to go. She often left the engine running while she went into the store. One day while she was in the store the car was running, and it slipped into gear. The car jerked forward and bumped the front of the store.

Mild Ending: Fortunaltely, no one was hurt and there was no damage to the car or store.

Severe Ending: The car broke the big glass front window of the store and a little girl inside the store was cut pretty badly by the flying glass.

Sue

Sue was on a ladder painting the trim on her house. David, her four-year-old-son,

was watching her. The phone rang and Sue went into the house to answer it. While Sue was gone David decided to climb up the ladder.

Mild Ending: The ladder slipped and fell spilling Sue's paint. David was splashed with paint but unhurt.

Severe Ending: The ladder slipped and fell, spilling Sue's paint and giving David a bad bump on the head.

Mark

Mark was working on his car one day. He poured gasoline into the carburetor to get the car started.

Mild Ending: As Mark turned on the ignition, a spark ignited the gasoline; it caused a loud pop that scared Mark, but the car started ok, and no harm was done.

Severe Ending: As Mark turned on the ignition, a spark ignited the gasoline; the flame set the car on fire. Mark was burned putting out the fire and the car was almost a total loss.

Charles

Charles was fishing in his boat when he noticed Todd and Shelly, a friend's children, on the shore. He came over and asked if they would like to fish with him in the boat. Todd and Shelly climbed aboard and Charles went to the center of the lake. Not long afterward a bad storm began to blow up. Charles started to head back to shelter but the storm overtook them. The rain and wind caused the boat to capsize. Charles called to the children to hang onto the boat.

Mild ending: All three clung to the overturned boat until they were rescued. They were scared, wet, and cold, but were ok.

Severe Ending: Even with Charles' help, Todd was not able to hang on. Todd eventually washed away from the boat and drowned.

The subjects used a 7-point rating scale to respond to six opinion statements presented as contrasted pairs, designed to measure subject's perception of the actor's: (a)

responsibility for the accident; (b) intelligence; (c) goodness or badness; (d) carelessness; (e) concern for others; and (f) the foreseeability of the accident.

Procedure

Subjects participated as a group a a prearranged time in a classroom setting. Subjects were asked to read the stories and record their opinions on the rating scale. All subjects responded to the baseline story and one of two sets of each of the remaining four stories. That is, each subject received one of two sets of stories in random fashion. Set 1 consisted of the Sue and Charles stories with the mild ending and Mark and Jackie stories with the severe ending. Set 2 consisted of the mirror of set 1, that is the Sue and Charles stories with the severe ending, and the Mark and Jackie stories with the mild ending. Both sets included stories with both female and male actors involved in both mild and severe consequences.

Scoring

The dependent variables, responses to opinion statements, were scored on a seven-point Likert scale with a score of seven representing the harshest, most negative judgment and a score of one the least harsh, more positive judgment.

Severity of Consequence Rankings

In random fashion, half of the 58 additional subjects received the four mild ending stories and half the severe ending stories. Subjects were asked to rank the stories for severity of outcome, a rank of 1 being the most severe and 4 least severe.

Results

Severity of Story Endings

Rankings of severity of consequences for the harsher ending stories, from most severe to least severe were as follows: (1) Charles; (2) Jackie; (3) Mark; and (4) Sue. In the mild ending group of stories the rankings were as follows: (1) Charles; (2) Sue; (3) Jackie; and (4) Mark. A 4X4 Chi square analysis was used to assess the frequency by rank and by story.

Effects of Severity of Consequences

An one-way analysis of variance was performed on the subjects' responses to the different story ending. No significant differences between the two groups were found on the baseline story. No main effects of story endings were found in subjects' responses to the Sue or Jackie stories. For the Mark story, a significant difference was found for Intelligence, F (1, 59) = 12.49, p .001, and Carelessness, F (1, 59) = 7.80, p .01. Subjects judged Mark to be less intelligent and more careless in the version of the story with the more severe ending.

Responses to the Charles story showed significant effects for Intelligence, F (1, 59) = 7.34, p .01, Carelessness, F (1, 59) = 5.85, p .01, and Foreseeability, F (1,59) = 4.83, p .05. Charles was judged to be less intelligent and more careless, and the outcome was judged to be more foreseeable in the version of the story with the more severe ending. Several nonsignificant trends were found. In the more severe version, Charles was judged to be more responsible for what happened than in the milder version, F (1,59) = 3.68, p .06. Charles was also judged to be a worse person when the story had a severe ending, and a better person when the ending was mild, F (1,59) = 3.61, p .06. A significant composite effect was also found for the Charles story, F (1,59) = 8.46, p .01. Judgments made in response to the severe ending Charles story were much harsher than the judgments made to the mild ending of the same story.

Discussion

The present study demonstrates that consequences can affect moral judgments, with more severe consequences resulting in more negative judgments. Thus, as hypothesized, it appears that adults, like children do not always stay at their expected developmental level when making moral judgments. Results also show that intent is taken into consideration when making judgments. It should be noted that Piaget's (1932/1965) original conception of negative intent was rule breaking. By that criterion, the

three dilemma stories with neutral intent would be considered negtive intent in the original Piagetian view. The Charles character was the only one with a truly positive intent and negative consequences, and the one where consequences most clearly affected moral judgments. However, subjects were responsive to intent, giving more positive judgments for the Charles character than for the other three.

The findings of this study and others (Berg-Cross, 1975; Chandler, Greenspan, & Barenboim, 1973; Darley, Klosson & Zanna, 1978; Moran & McCullers, 1984; O'Malley, 1986; Walster, 1966) indicate that both children and adults can be responsive to situational circumstances, resulting in shifts of moral judgments. These results present difficulties for Kohlberg's conception of homogeneity of moral reasoning stages, and would be more consistent with Piaget's (1932/1965) original theory of moral development.

Several theorists have suggested possible explanations for the occurrence of mixed moral judgments. Piaget (1932/1965) suggests:

> It may therefore very well be that in the moral sphere there is simply a time-lag between the child's concrete evaluations and his theoretical judgment of value, the latter being an adequate and progressive conscious realization of the former. We shall meet with children who, for example, take

> no account of intentions in appraising actions on verbal plane (objective responsibility), but who, when asked for personal experiences, show that they take full account of the intentions that come play. It may be that in such cases the theoretical simply lags behind the practical moral judgment that shows in an adequate manner a stage that has been superseded on the plane of action. (p.117)

Flavell (1982) proposes that in areas where people have had little experience they tend to use more fixed forms of reasoning, consistently centering on the most salient aspect of the situation. The less experience, the more intellectual homogeneity. Thus moral judgments of young children tend to be more homogeneous because they have had limited experience.

A similar theory has been suggested by Elkind (1981). Elkind proposes that mental growth occurs by substitution and by integration. When mental growth occurs by substitution the old idea is not eradicated, but remains as a potential mode of thought with the possibility of re-emergence. This may be the case in moral judgments. Elkind (1981) has also suggested learning as another explanation. He has pointed out that children are very alert to their parents' reactions to the consequences of actions, even though parents may emphasize intent as the proper basis for

judging an action. Elkind proposes that children tend to center on what their parents do rather than what they say.

Finally, McCullers and his colleague (Fabes, McCullers, and Moran, 1985; McCullers, Fabes, & Moran, 1987; Moran, McCullers, & Fabes, 1984) have proposed that material rewards may produce temporary developmental regression. Recently, O'Malley (1986) has show that rewards can produce regression in moral reasoning. Other environmental circumstances, such as severe consequences, might touch an emotional chord, something like the regression under material reward, and allow old modes of moral reasoning to emerge.

The present findings and this discussion have not been offered as a general criticism of Kohlberg's theory of moral development. They do, however, present problems with the conception of stage homogeneity. For this reason, researchers may find it fruitful to reexamine Piaget's (1932/1965) original views of stage homogeneity in moral development.

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